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SUBJECT: POLAND RESPONDS TO AVIAN FLU OUTBREAKS

REF: A. WARSAW 03212

[1](#)B. WARSAW 03364

[1](#)1. Summary. In response to the confirmed outbreak of H5N1 avian influenza in Romania and Turkey, the GOP has taken several steps to prepare for a potential outbreak on Polish soil. An emergency anti-epidemic committee has been formed that cuts across key ministries and agencies, including Health, Interior, and the Chief Veterinary Inspectorate. The committee meets weekly. The GOP has scheduled emergency preparedness drills for the end of October. Regulations issued on October 17 require all domestic birds be moved inside enclosed areas and prohibit sales of live fowl. Embassy Warsaw is working with the Chief Veterinary Inspectorate (CVI) to organize training by USDA experts in emergency response management and communications during animal disease outbreaks. End Summary.

[1](#)2. An outbreak of Avian Influenza (AI) in Poland could devastate the Polish poultry industry with annual exports valued at almost 30 million Euros. There are approximately 900,000 farms that raise birds in Poland, the majority of which are small farms that raise a few chickens, ducks or turkeys for subsistence consumption. An AI outbreak would likely ravage this large segment of Polish rural society and the central government would be called upon to provide compensation to farmers.

[1](#)3. Based on information from the recent outbreaks in Romania and Turkey, the CVI has heightened surveillance in bird migration areas (e.g., the northern lakes region of Poland) but not around farms. According to Poland's Chief Veterinary Officer, winter migration of birds will peak in the coming weeks and the threat of an AI outbreak this fall will disappear by the end of November, assuming cold weather arrives. A warm fall would extend the migration window. He added that heightened surveillance (which taxes the resources of his office) would resume in mid-March, about the time returning birds would be expected to reach Poland. He opined that an AI outbreak in southern wintering areas would almost guarantee an outbreak in Poland next spring, as birds returned to summer nesting areas.

[1](#)4. In response to the most recent AI outbreaks, on October 17, the CVI announced that farmers must keep their flocks confined in enclosed (fenced) areas. The same regulation prohibits the sale of live fowl. These new regulations and information about AI clinical signs and basic biosecurity precautions to take when handling sick birds have been put on the CVI's website and on handbills disseminated this week to local (county and town) officials throughout Poland. Officials have been instructed to distribute them to farmers and post them on town and church bulletin boards. Enforcement will begin next week and violators face hefty fines and up to three years in jail. Hunting wild fowl is still permitted for the time being and hunters have been instructed to be alert for sick birds. If a bird appears sick, hunters are to shoot it and several nearby birds and bring them to CVI officials for testing.

[1](#)5. According to the CVI, major poultry farms are taking precautions beyond those required to ensure the safety of their flocks. The CVI has been working closely with the two major poultry producer associations in Poland, as well as smaller associations (e.g., ostrich association) to educate farmers about AI and inform them of the new restrictions.

[1](#)6. In addition to ramping up surveillance and restricting farm bird movement, the CVI has established a small emergency center based on ideas gleaned from a visit to the USG emergency center in Beltsville, MD, last winter. The center is small, but has its own telephone and fax lines, email addresses, Internet access and soon, video conferencing capability. In addition, Embassy Warsaw is working closely with the CVI to complete plans for training in emergency response management and emergency communications during animal disease outbreaks. USDA experts will give the training, scheduled for November 14-17. AI-specific training (risk assessment, epidemiology, etc.) is planned for early next year.

Preparing for Possible Outbreaks

17. In meetings with Secretary of State Zbigniew Podraza, Ministry of Health, Econ Counselor learned that the GOP has marshaled PLN 300 million (approximately USD 93 million) in reserve funding to combat an avian influenza epidemic or pandemic. PLN 100 million of this amount has been dedicated for purchasing other medications and disinfection equipment. The GOP has allocated an additional PLN 20 million for vaccinations against H5N1 in humans, though it is not clear how doses can be purchased since a vaccine has not yet been developed. Ministry of Health officials stressed that the GOP views avian influenza as more of an economic threat than a public health problem at this point.

Comment

18. The GOP is clearly taking the threat of an avian influenza epidemic and possible pandemic seriously. The threat of an outbreak has been front page news for the past several days. Flu vaccinations have disappeared from pharmacy stocks across the country, despite the fact that the "flu shot" will not provide any protection against avian influenza. The GOP faces a stiff challenge in disseminating information and enforcing the new regulation on keeping poultry contained and banning the sale of live birds. The Polish countryside is expansive and the extent to which local veterinary authorities will be able to conduct adequate monitoring remains to be seen. The migratory patterns of birds wintering to the South will most certainly mean that some potential carriers of H5N1 will pass through Poland next spring. Though it seems unlikely, it is possible that the virus has already passed through Polish territory, though no suspected outbreaks have been detected. On the bright side, most of Poland's poultry is produced by large-scale industrial farmers with modern facilities that are operated entirely indoors. GOP officials confirm that these farmers are taking appropriate precautions. End comment.
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